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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN'S FLAG DAY: ANOTHER NIYAZOV DOG
DOESN'T BARK

Classified By: CDA RICHARD E. HOAGLAND: 1.4 (B), (D)

¶1. (SBU) Turkmenistan celebrated February 19 as Flag Day, a new national holiday previously marked as former President Niyazov's birthday. As usual for public holidays in Turkmenistan, multiple elaborate public events were scheduled the day before and the actual day of the holiday, and rehearsed weeks in advance. Some events were notified to the diplomatic community as "presidential events" (meaning chiefs of mission were expected to show up) including the official opening of the Ruhnama School in central Ashgabat (see para two below), a gala concert, a dawn wreath-laying, the Olympic stadium super-show, and the government reception.

¶2. (SBU) At the February 18 Ruhnama School event, when the president was uncharacteristically nearly an hour late showing up, the deputy prime ministers huddled and decided to start without him, even though the presidential protocol assistants had assured the impatient chiefs of mission the president "absolutely was scheduled to attend," and one even bet the Turkish Ambassador a lunch that Berdimuhamedov was simply detained. Ruhnama School is not dedicated to teaching Niyazov's "Ruhnama" -- it's simply the name of the school. In fact, it's a specialized comprehensive school for math and science. At eight stories, it's unusually big for Ashgabat, where most new schools are uniformly four stories. In fact, the first four floors are the school, and the top four will be new offices for the city of Ashgabat's education department.

¶3. (SBU) The next event where the president clearly was expected was the wreath-laying ceremony where the entire government and thousands of citizens had gathered before dawn on February 19. The president was clearly expected, but a half hour after the event was to begin, workers scrambled to roll up the red carpets, protocol assistants dashed hither and yon urgently whispering into their cell phones, and Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Meredov eventually

took charge and led the ceremony.

14. (C) At the presidential reception that evening during a pull-aside conversation, Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov confided to Charge that Flag Day was held because "the people and the elders expected" the standard holiday events that had marked Niyazov's birthday, but the president himself was keeping his distance. Media reports on February 19 and 20 reported the festivities -- and made clear President Berdimuhamedov had maintained a full schedule of internal government meetings and meetings with an unusually large number of diplomatic and business delegations. The fireworks that closed the two-day holiday were as excellent as always.
HOAGLAND